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SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN ELECTIONS 2008: MAJOR OPPOSITION  
PARTIES WILL NOT PARTICIPATE

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Donald Lu, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Three major opposition forces in Azerbaijan-- Azadliq bloc, Musavat Party, and Azerbaijan Democratic Reform Party-- have announced that they will not participate in October's presidential election. While these parties no longer have a stQg base of support in the country, as the "traditional" opposition parties they remain the most well-known in the opposition. At least four, and possibly up to ten, other candidates are likely to contest the election against current president Ilham Aliyev, but most observers agree none of these candidates represents a serious challenge to the President's bid to win a second term. Opposition leaders, in announcing their decisions to forego a run at the presidency, cited a poor, unbalance pre-election environment, with restrictions on media and freedom of assembly. END SUMMARY

¶2. (C) On July 20 the Azadliq bloc announced it would boycott Azerbaijan's presidential election scheduled for October 15. The Azadliq bloc is the largest opposition bloc in the country, and is a union of the Popular Front Party led by Ali Karimli, the Liberal Party led by Lala Shevket, and the Citizen and Development Party. Azadliq had earlier stated that the bloc would boycott the election if the GOAJ did not create conditions appropriate to a free and fair election, including (what they would consider) balanced representation on electoral commissions, protection of freedom of assembly, release of jailed journalists, and equal access to media for all candidates. At the meeting of the supreme bodies of the three parties on July 20, it was determined that these conditions were not met, and therefore the bloc would boycott.

¶3. (C) On August 2 the Musavat Party, one of Azerbaijan's largest opposition parties led by Isa Gambar, announced it also would not participate in October's presidential election. Musavat's decision is not a boycott, however, as the party is not banning its members from voting in the election. The decision not to run a candidate was controversial within the party. According to Musavat deputy chairman Sulhaddin Akbar, the party's assembly on August 2 discussed several participation scenarios, including conducting a normal campaign in order to connect with voters and then withdrawing ten days prior to the election as a protest. In the end, the restrictions on campaign timing, media freedom, and the party's financial limitations led to the decision not to participate at all, although of the 84 party assembly members at the meeting, six still voted to participate and seven abstained. In addition, the editor-in-chief of the party's paper "Yeni Musavat" Rauf Arifoglu told several newspapers on August 5 that he is

debating a run for president, despite his party's decision not to participate.Q Gambar has replied publicly that Arifoglu would not be allowed to run under the Musavat Party name.

¶4. (C) In addition, on August 2 the Azerbaijan Democratic Party (ADP), led by Sardar Jalaloglu, also decided not to participate in the election. Jalaloglu stated to Embassy officials that the deteriorating political climate in Azerbaijan made it impossible for a free and fair election to be held. Similar to the Musavat Party, Jalaloglu felt that the shortening of the election campaign period combined with the limited access of opposition parties to media coverage and inability to hold rallies in central Baku made it impossible for his party to reach voters. In addition, his party's polling indicated that 95 percent of voters are not interested in this election, and therefore the ADP felt it was not worth participating.

¶5. (C) Due to these party decisions, as of August 5 the Central Election Commission had received paperwork from only four candidates: current President Ilham Aliyev; Igbal Agazade of the Hope Party; Gudrat Gassanguliyev of the United People's Front; and Hafiz Hacıyev of the Modern Musavat Party. Eldar Namazov, a top advisor to former president Heydar Aliyev, has told Embassy officials he plans to run as an independent candidate; however, he has not yet formally announced his candidacy. Six other party leaders have announced intentions to run, but it remains to be seen whether any will be able to collect the 40,000 signatures required to register as a presidential candidate.

COMMENT  
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¶6. (C) While international and domestic observers did not expect any of the non-participating parties to put forward a serious challenge to current president Ilham Aliyev winning a second term of office, as the "traditional opposition" they are the largest and most well-known opposition parties in the country. In the last presidential election in 2003 several of these parties united under the candidacy of Isa Gambar of Musavat, who did win a significant percentage of the vote. Of the candidates who have announced their participation, only Agazade and Namazov are well-known in the country. Agazade supported Gambar in the 2003 election, and was arrested during a post-election protest and allegedly tortured into publicly denouncing Gambar. This turn-around has lost him credibility within the country. Namazov, however, is largely respected as intelligent commentator on the current political situation, but lacks a party structure of dedicated following to unite any of the various opposition forces behind him. As a result, it is unlikely that any of the opposition candidates in the field today will receive more than token support during this campaign, and debate of the issues along the way may not be widespread or insightful.  
LU